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SUBJECT: CNDD ANNOUNCES INTENT TO HOLD ELECTIONS IN LAST QUARTER OF 2009 - CENI AND CIVIL SOCIETY PUSH FOR DATE

¶1. SUMMARY. During a meeting with Charge, the CENI President was confident that Guinea could organize both presidential and legislative elections by the end of the year. The CENI planned to present CNDD President Dadis with a specific proposal, including a timeline, action plan, and budget by February 6. We have not confirmed that CENI delivered its package, but the CNDD announced on February 7 that elections will be held in the last quarter of 2009. Civil society is planning to pressure the CNDD to name a specific date. Although the CENI President was generally optimistic, he was careful to emphasize that holding elections is technically possible, but that the reality will ultimately depend on political will. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Charge met with Ben Sekou Syllah, President of Guinea's National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI), on February 2. Syllah was joined by one of the CENI vice presidents and a Colonel from Mali who is acting as a consultant to the CENI for the next two months, courtesy of the Francophonie. The Charge was joined by USAID Director and Poloff.

CNDD IS WILLING TO HOLD ELECTIONS

¶3. (U) According to Syllah, the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD) has publicly demonstrated its willingness to organize elections. Describing the CNDD's rhetoric as "encouraging," Syllah said that the CNDD's decision to place the CENI directly under its control demonstrates the military junta's commitment. Syllah added that the CENI continues to operate as usual without interference from the CNDD.

¶4. (SBU) Referring to the late January retreat funded by USAID, Syllah said that the conference provided an opportunity for CENI members to review its internal structure and strategic plan, in consideration of recent political changes. "We have already finished the timeline and our action plan, and we're working to finalize the budget," Syllah told the Charge. He said that he planned to present the entire proposal to CNDD President Moussa Dadis Camara by February 6. Syllah said the proposal includes election dates, but that he could not share the dates with the U.S. Embassy since Dadis would ultimately need to make the decision and the announcement, although Syllah confirmed that the CENI is proposing to hold elections sometime in the last quarter of 2009. (COMMENT. As of late last week, contacts indicated that the CENI had not yet passed the proposal to Dadis. END COMMENT).

¶5. (SBU) In response to a question about perceived political will, Syllah said that the CNDD has been publicly supportive of elections, but has delegated decisions over timing and logistics to the CENI, political parties, and civil society.

"Once we propose our timeline, everything will be up to the CNDD, and then we will all have a better sense of the political will," he said.

¶ 6. (SBU) Syllah emphasized that despite remaining logistical challenges, both presidential and legislative elections could be organized before the end of the year. "We know we (the CENI) can organize elections this year," he said, adding "the reality is going to depend on everyone else...the overall political will." Later, Syllah said that if things did not progress according to the realistic timeline the CENI had developed, the fault would not lie with the CENI. Syllah noted that the most time consuming element of the timeline is the voter registration process, which he said would be finished by the end of August. "After registration is completed, we will be free to hold whatever election we want," he said.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM IS NECESSARY

¶ 7. (SBU) On the question of a civil society push for constitutional reform, Syllah said that this process needs to advance simultaneously. He stated that the elections should not take place without a newly revised constitution in place. However, he did not see this process as a potential cause for delay. According to Syllah, civil society leaders have almost finished a draft of the core necessary revisions, which they plan to present to the CNDD. (COMMENT. It was unclear how these changes would be implemented, i.e. via presidential decree, national referendum, etc. END COMMENT).

CONAKRY 00000097 002 OF 002

FINANCES CONTINUE TO BE THE MAIN STUMBLING BLOCK

¶ 8. (SBU) Syllah emphasized that budgetary constraints are much more of a concern than legal issues. He said that continued funding challenges posed the biggest threat to holding elections within the year. Syllah noted that the members of the international community, including France and ECOWAS, have indicated that they would be willing to contribute additional funds to close the funding gap. Poloff questioned whether the Guinean Government would be putting forth any funds to which Syllah replied "yes, yes, yes," waving his hand as if to suggest that government funding would not be a problem. At this point, the Malian Colonel urged the U.S. Embassy and other donors to offer more financing in order to overcome any lack of political will to move the process forward.

CENI REMAINS COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT

¶ 9. (SBU) During the course of the discussion, Syllah repeatedly stressed that the CENI remains independent and has "complete authority" to organize elections. He noted that Dadis would need to approve the date and that the CNDD would ultimately need to release budgeted funds, but that the electoral process itself will remain completely independent. "The CNDD will tell us when to have elections...we will determine how they will be conducted," he said.

¶ 10. (SBU) Explaining how the process would work now that the CENI has the lead responsibility for elections organization, as opposed to the government through the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Political Affairs (MATAP), Syllah said that MATAP will be responsible for providing all technical and logistical assistance. "They will need to make the system available to us," he said. Syllah said that the election steering committee continues to meet regularly, confidently adding that "co-management will not be a

problem."

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Syllah was generally optimistic about the prospects of holding both legislative and presidential election within the year. However, he couched his optimism in terms of what the CENI actually has control of, leaving the door open to blame others for any delays that might occur. The bottom line seemed to be that it is technically possible for Guinea to hold elections in 2009, but whether or not elections actually happen will be a reflection of political will. The CNDD announced on February 7 that elections will be held in the last quarter of 2009, but did not specify which elections or a concrete date. Civil society and political parties reportedly intend to pressure the CNDD to pinpoint a date. For the process to advance smoothly, a date should be set soon. END COMMENT.

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